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Spring 5-1-2011

Style Talk: A collection of Interviews on Personal Style

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Recommended Citation

Dulay, Lauren, "Style Talk: A collection of Interviews on Personal Style" (2011). *Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects*. 210.

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My mother sparked my interest in having a fashionable wardrobe when I was young and influenced me to dress nicely and express myself through my clothes. What we wear is more than just clothing. An outfit is part of someone's image and an image leads to a first impression. It is that first impression that leaves a lasting impact on someone's mind whether you see that person again or not. There have been plenty of times where I have walked down the street and liked someone's dress or thought somebody else didn't look in a mirror before leaving her house. It seems shallow, but what you put on your body sends a non-verbal message to others. Fashion can also be seen as art. The outfits you can assemble from the clothes in your wardrobe are defined as style. Style is your personal taste expressed through hair, make-up, fabric, and accessories.

I have always enjoyed reading fashion blogs that do picture style profiles on random individuals on the street. The author of these blog posts would find someone's style choice appealing and by doing a photo feature on the fashionista and posting it online, her outfit can inspire others to dress similarly or take only one item from the outfit and newly incorporate it into her wardrobe.

Despite studying media and video production, I have continued to love fashion. It was only natural for me to apply to the Fashion and Beauty Communications Milestone Program, which is a perfect combination of fulfilling media courses within the Newhouse school while being able to learn about fashion history and communications, which I normally wouldn't be exposed to in a regular communications curriculum.

In the Spring of 2010, I took two courses, *Producing Cross-Platform Messages for Fashion Communications* and *Producing the Fashion Video*. In both classes we explored various fashion stories and discussed our inspirations with relation to the fashion world. In *Producing Cross-Platform Messages* we analyzed professional fashion articles, videos, and websites and used multiple media programs to create mini-projects throughout the semester. I began the course using Soundslides, a program that lets anyone easily create picture slideshows accompanied by an audio track or narration. I soon transitioned to audio editing through Audacity and finally incorporated the video editing system Final Cut Pro into our curriculum. It was nice to learn the technical aspects of what makes a good fashion story. By solidifying a storyline, I learned the basic lesson of respectable journalism. With a story in tact, I was able to add the special effects of video and audio editing in order to enhance my media package. *Producing the Fashion Video* was more creative in the sense that I had to document the story of a senior fashion design major. Through video, I wanted to know her inspiration for her final collection, what sparked her interest in fashion design, and her future aspirations.

All the while, I was still struggling to develop a capstone idea. After deciding I didn't want to create a screenplay or short movie that most Television-Radio-Film majors do, I was stuck. I didn't know how to incorporate fashion into a media project other than interviewing people. However, I couldn't just hand in a bunch of interviews where people would just talk about fashion and how it relates

to them. I was missing a key overarching thesis that would connect a bunch of interviews together.

To help us with the creativity process, my instructor who would later become my advisor, Jason encouraged us to share our favorite videos with the class. I chose to showcase an interview by Fashion TV for Neil Barrett's Spring/Summer 2008 collection. After I first saw it two years ago, the interview left an impression on me, because it was different from other fashion interviews. I liked how Fashion TV let Neil Barrett explain his inspiration for the menswear collection and what he wanted the audience to take away from the show. What made the piece more appealing was the segment with the models. It's rare to hear a model's voice, and by including them into a video, it was like a sneak peek into a different world. Hearing their experiences and seeing what their true personalities are like backstage humanized them and even though they have a glorified profession, they are still normal people. This interview had a definite story. Sure, it was about Neil Barrett's collection, but the characters enhanced the piece and it made me want to know more about those we don't see in front of the camera or those we don't speak with often.

I didn't realize it then, but the benefit of taking those classes simultaneously made me realize I could expand what I learned and develop my final idea. Eventually, I chose to model my capstone after these classes since they both utilized multimedia to focus on a fashion story. At the time I had a basic idea of interviewing females from various ethnic backgrounds who can speak about their culture and the beauty standards of the culture and the way fashion is viewed

in their particular culture. Finally I had a idea that I could propose and even though the concept wasn't fully solidified, it had a direction.

It's somewhat coincidental that once I developed this basic idea, I saw a commercial for Jessica Simpson's *The Price of Beauty*, which had a similar premise. Simpson aimed to bring awareness to how the media skews our view of real beauty and that women feel the pressure to look a certain way. She wanted to show Americans that what is considered beautiful is not the same in different countries. I watched a few episodes and I commend Simpson for her efforts, but there were moments that made me cringe and knew she added to the negative American stigma. Although Simpson's goals for this show were well intentioned, her interviews with local women highlighted Simpson's American ignorance. It was embarrassing to see her laugh during a Buddhist ceremony or wonder why some countries prefer pale skin as opposed to the American's positive attitude towards tanning. It wasn't a surprise that people didn't take her movement seriously and the series only lasted one season.

I was well aware that doing this project by myself would be a challenge but I knew what I wanted to do even though my idea wasn't fully clear to me yet. Instead of doing studio interviews that seem rehearsed, I wanted to make my interviews more street style. I wanted the answers to be organic and see a young woman in her element. I wanted to focus more on an individual's fashion story. Her views are her own, but I wanted to see to what extent her culture might have influenced her attitude towards fashion and the style choices she makes everyday.

My next problem was finding non-American women who wanted to discuss their style. My mother mentioned that my extended family in New Zealand wanted to see me, since it's been over a decade since we last met. I found the timing of the trip convenient. I thought that two weeks in Wellington, New Zealand would be the perfect way to take a summer vacation and get a head start on my capstone. Maybe I could just compare New Zealand style to American style? The idea seemed good in theory, but I wish I had known the obstacles I overlooked before my departure.

My trip was horrible. Three flights and a seventeen-hour time difference later, I was exhausted and my first three days consisted of eating, sleeping, and adjusting to the time zone and the weather. Once I recovered, I was determined to start exploring the streets of Wellington and hope someone's outfit would catch my eye.

What aggravated me the most about my sixteen-day trip was the limited freedom I had while underneath my aunt and uncle's supervision. I disregarded the fact that I was living with a different family. I'm older than all of the children, yet I was treated as a child. I wasn't allowed to explore the city by myself. I needed to be accompanied by my eighteen-year-old cousin when leaving the premises and our personalities didn't mesh well. Being an only child, I was used to the independence. Now I was in a foreign country and my ability to leave the house was determined by someone else who would only help me if he felt like it. After the first week, I gave up trying to find any potential interviewees in New

Zealand. If I had known I would be spending most of my time indoors, I would have never gone on this trip.

Once I got back home I was back at square one. By the time September hit, I was clueless on what to do. I had no time to travel anywhere. I was embarrassed by my lack of progress and thought that my capstone plans were over, yet I didn't want to give up the opportunity to create something. I finally owned up to my failure of a summer and emailed my reader, Ashley. I was fearful in sending her an email, because I thought my lack of contact would change her mind in wanting to help me. Luckily, she was relieved and thought I had given up on the project entirely. With her help, we strategized a new plan of attack. I could still get the opinions of international students, since Syracuse University is diverse and has a good amount of non-American students.

The new plan was to interview American and non-American female students on campus. I had a list of specific questions regarding their personal style choices to certain items they may own and how it correlates to familial or cultural influences. With my questions set, I aimed to find at least six girls. Six seemed like an ample amount of interviews to me. Four seemed too little and eight was overwhelming. Even though my target was six interviews, I was open to interviewing more girls and picking the best six to hand in for my project.

After failed attempts of finding girls via email, I decided to handpick people I knew and ask them to participate. I wanted the girls I interviewed to be as diverse as possible. No one could be from the same area and I tried my best to

recruit women from different ethnic backgrounds to get the most even representation possible.

Being an American student myself, I wanted to get these interviews done first. Madison was the easiest person to contact. I knew she put effort into her look whenever we had to attend special event for our co-ed fraternity and even seeing her randomly on campus, she was always put together.

I felt nervous interviewing Madison, because I had a time constraint. We planned to give her interview a theme and scheduled it a few hours before our semi-formal. It was also the first time I put my pre-planned questions to the test. She was uncomfortable about filming in her room because it was messy. Honestly from my point of view, I was worried about her roommate who was cooking dinner. Madison's bedroom door couldn't close properly and I didn't want any background noise to disrupt the interview. I took note of planning interviews better for next time. I utilized all the zoom features of the flipcam and for transition shots, I decided to film her putting on makeup, but focusing on the mirror. I find mirror shots to be artsy and they are one of my favorite things to shoot. My frustration with working with friends is that it's more difficult to be honest with them and direct them through an interview. I didn't want to come across as bossy and we were already running late for our semi-formal. Looking back at the footage, I learned not to use the zoom button. It made the video fuzzy. In the rest of my interviews I chose to do dolly shoots in which I physically moved closer or away from the subject. It wasn't as smooth as a zoom and because I was shooting everything handheld instead of using a tripod, the footage

would be somewhat shaky and the dolly close-ups would have awkward movements. Another disadvantage was using the camera microphone opposed to a shotgun microphone, which didn't come with my flipcam. I constantly took chances with picking up background noises that could take away from my interviewee's audio. Luckily, the audio was clear despite the rustles of fellow students walking passed our interview or outside conversations and for that I consider myself lucky.

When I think of fashion videos, I envision high energy and quick beats. I realized that I wanted to focus on the stories of these individuals, not just make a fashion story. I could always add energy to an interview through music. It was already 8:30PM. Madison and I were already late for the semi-formal. She was worried about missing the buffet and I felt that I got enough footage, so I quickly wrapped things up and thought it went well for a first interview.

After showing my advisors Madison's footage, I realized there wasn't much of a story and had to rebook Madison for part two of her interview. To avoid this problem, I tailored my questions so I could get a basic, yet concrete story out of each of the young women. I finally edited my list of interview questions for all of the girls:

1. Describe your style.
2. Do you believe you're fashionable or has anyone considered you fashionable? Explain why or why not.
3. What is your favorite item of clothing if you have one?
4. Did your family or culture influence your style? Explain.

5. Do you pick your outfits to portray a certain image to others? Explain.
6. Tell us about your outfit.
7. What's the difference in fashion from back home to fashion in the United States?

I simplified the questions to be shown on a graphic, since there was a limited amount of space on each slide. The seventh question was only asked to the International students, because they are going to school in the United States and I wanted them to share their observations about Americans and their style and see if there are any major differences to what they see back at home.

Once I had my questions solidified, I developed an overarching thesis for the interviews. It started to look like a series. These interviews weren't long enough to be on television, but they were short enough to be streamed online. That's when my idea started to incorporate the aspect of multimedia and I started to view my work as a potential web series, in which viewers could take a five minute break and have time to watch one of the style profiles. This led me to a name the series, *Style Talk*, because basically I was talking to girls about their style. The simple name suited the series, since my interviews are raw and have no gimmicks. The girls are talking directly to the camera and sharing their stories with the audience.

Even though I increased my progression after interviewing Madison, the rest of the American student interviews weren't smooth at all. I was still desperate and started to contact people who had good fashion, but I was unsure how their story would translate onto the camera and in the editing room. I frantically called

my friend Tamara and asked her to partake in *Style Talk*. I was relieved to book another interview, until I got to her room and saw what she was wearing. I knew right away that her white shirt, white hat ensemble would look horrible against a white background, but I couldn't tell her to change, since she was doing me a favor at the last minute. Her interview also had a theme, since she was heading to a birthday party later that evening. I thought that having a theme for some of the interviewees would be a good idea instead of doing a style profile on everyday wear for each person.

After that night I decided to scratch the idea of having every interview having a different theme. *Style Talk* would revolve around a young woman's outfit that she chose to wear to the interview and if we filmed in her room, I could also highlight her entire wardrobe and let the interviewee select the pieces she wants to share with the camera. I still wasn't selective with my interviewees seeing that no one was interested in being a part of my project. My mindset was to take an opportunity to interview someone, film it, and then deal with all the problems in post-production.

After finally having a template for my interviews and contacting friends, and friends of friends, I planned all my interviews and was ready to film with a solid direction. Although pre-production went smoothly, there are many unforeseen obstacles that arise through filming. Who knew that filming friends was more difficult than filming strangers or that I would have to think of new filming locations due to inclement weather even though the forecast told me the opposite?

My third American student interview was once again planned on a whim. Jen wasn't the typical choice for a fashion interview. She described herself as "Plain Jane" and didn't like to spend a lot of money on clothes. She was the typical American girl who bought her jeans at American Eagle Outfitters and her tops at Express. The only designer thing she owned was a Coach purse. However, there was something about her effortless style that was appealing. Basic pieces are key to a wardrobe. She demonstrates that someone doesn't need to break the bank to be considered fashionable. I thought of interviewing Jen, since she would represent those girls who work with whatever they have and are able to expand their wardrobe by mixing and matching pieces without spending a lot of money. She's a true example of style.

Since we were filming in her apartment, I decided to take advantage of the fact she hadn't done her hair or makeup yet in order to do mirror shots. It was difficult balancing myself on the bathtub and hanging from the shower curtain railing in order to not film my reflection in her bathroom mirror. I thought a second interview with a mirror shot wouldn't be too repetitive and added another interesting visual element. As usual, this interview didn't go smoothly, because of me. Once again I felt rushed because I scheduled this shoot on an impulse. My nerves got the best of me and I made her redo certain shots because I kept forgetting to press the record button. I felt so unprofessional and embarrassed, because out of all the interviewees, she was my closest friend. I looked like it was my first time ever holding a camera and doing an interview. I was just so pressured to finish on time so I wouldn't interfere with her schedule.

Oddly enough my International student interviews came out better even though they were all strangers. I booked three girls that were from Canada, Kazakhstan, and China. It fit with my plan perfectly to have a variety of girls all over the world.

I had lighting and audio problems with all three girls. Moment's interview was the most challenging. We originally decided to film in the space among all three Newhouse buildings, since it was pouring, I had to think of a new indoor location fast. I preferred doing outdoor interviews because of lighting. I wanted to use natural light, so my subjects would look better. We settled on using the Safire Room in Bird the books in the background were so beautiful. It made the shot more interesting and I was really happy, because I didn't want the audience to be bored with a plain background and I like added decorative details to a piece, especially if it's a part of the natural environment. The space was quiet, the background looked good, but Moment was washed out by the fluorescent lights. No matter where I positioned her, you couldn't see her face. I had a choice, risk shooting her in front of a pretty background or pick another location within the room. I took a risk and made her sit on the windowsill across the same room. I shut the shades so the sunlight wouldn't seep through and cause distinct shadows. Checking into the camera, Moment looked better. It was a bit dark, but I picked filming her looking off-color with a bit of shadowing over a washed out look.

After reviewing all my footage, I noticed I had no Latina representation in any of my interviews. Being unsatisfied with my American interviews, I decided to film Carolyn, a Latina from Miami. It's the interview I'm the most excited to

share. The weather was perfect, her answers fit the questions, and her outfit reflected the stories she shared about her style and familial influence. I chose to film her on a bench in front of one of the statues on the quad. The statue is seen behind her left shoulder and the color contrast and positioning to Carolyn added depth to the background without being distracting. The issue with dollying the camera is clearly seen here. My awkward close-ups on her jewelry are noticeable, but this is a common problem during filming. It wasn't too disturbing, so I kept the shot. What also made it a great interview was the transition from outdoors to indoors. She was comfortable in letting me shoot her in her room and discuss certain items within her closet. Carolyn's story line seemed complete in comparison to other interviews.

Finally I completed filming and could solely concentrate on post-production. Out of the girls I interviewed, I chose the six I wanted for my final version of *Style Talk*, but due to technical difficulties, I ended up with five. I dropped one of the interviews due to the poor visual quality, which was off-putting to a point where I was no longer listening to what she was saying. Also, Jen's footage got corrupted within Final Cut Pro. No matter what I did, the frames constantly dropped and the timeline was completely off. I uploaded the footage and edited it multiple times, but nothing worked. Unfortunately, there was no time to redo Jen's interview. Overall, I was satisfied with the diversity I had among the interviewees despite completing five interviews instead of my original goal of six.

To finish branding *Style Talk*, I used a decorative font, Marker Felt, which compliments the style series. By choosing to have the interviewee's name be

larger than the title, the audience will know whose story they're viewing. Yes, the name of the show is important, but there is enough exposure of the logo throughout the piece that viewers do not need to be visually bombarded with it in the beginning.

As I mentioned before, I chose to let the girls speak to the camera in a conversational style. I did not want to rush them in order to fulfill an ideal rapid pace that is usually associated with fashion interviews. I understand that a few of the girls tended to ramble during the interviews and it was difficult to edit all of that out without making the piece sound choppy. Knowing that the interviews lag at certain points I chose music with steady electronic beats to help the audience get through the entire interview without getting bored. I made sure not to make the music drown out the girls' answers, but the sound is still audible to maintain the audience's interest. The theme song is Alex Lee's "Hotter," which was featured on an episode of *America's Next Top Model*. I used this particular fashion show for musical inspiration and since "Hotter" has been the most popular runway songs, I knew it would appeal to a mass audience. For background music, I chose instrumental versions of songs from the musical artists Dev, Far East Movement, and the Cataracs. The repetitive beats embellish the interviews, which would be mundane without any music.

Given that *Style Talk* is a series, I decided to make a trailer at the last minute using the theme song, "Hotter." I juxtaposed pieces from every interview, so it looks as if the girls are saying one sentence. It's very rapid, which fits the pace of the fashion industry and fashion itself. Since I had a limited amount of

interviews, the trailer is less than 30 seconds, so it's not long enough to be a commercial. I'm hoping to continue doing style interviews and can hopefully add enough footage to make another version the trailer. I added the slogan "Join the conversation" because everyone can contribute to *Style Talk* even if a person doesn't think she's stylish.

My original goal was to interview six girls. However, after looking back, there are many other features I wanted to add to *Style Talk*. For one, I wish I interviewed girls who weren't from the East Coast. Although the American girls were from different states, I wanted the opportunity to compare girls from the West, and Middle America and see if fashion also varied from region to region and not just country to country. I thought about interviewing guys, but there are very few guys on campus that have a distinct style. I wouldn't mind interviewing one "Average Joe," but with so many of them on campus, it wouldn't have panned out. Also, I wouldn't have had the time to find six other guys and do another set of *Style Talk*, so I chose to stick to interviewing girls, because it was easier for me to find a good amount of female students and showcase enough diversity.

What I want the audience to take away from *Style Talk* is to know everyone is a part of fashion. You don't need to always read the magazines and follow the trends in order to be stylish. Yves Saint Laurent once said, "Fashions fade, style is eternal." I agree since fashion is cyclical and the trends are constantly changing. What matters is how an individual picks and chooses what to wear and customizes the pieces according to personal taste and makes the trends

work for them instead of being a slave to the trends. *Style Talk* is an outlet for someone to explain what has shaped her as a person and how she expresses that through clothing. Fashion doesn't have to be elitist; everyone has a personal style story to share.